

THE BANNER SERIES OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES

The Metamorphosis of Corpus Delicti

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This ominously equipped individual was tall of stature, long-limbed, gaunt and strong. His eyes were dark and sullen, with drooping lids. His long moustache was also dark and drooping, and his voice was of a pitch so subterranean that it seemed to come from at least half a mile under ground, and of such a quality and tone that its faintest breathings would bring any stage team to a dead halt and elevate the hands of all the passengers. Any one familiar with Western mythology will understand at once that this brief description can apply to but one person, the noted Bill Deathburrow, the promoter of cemeteries and patron saint of undertakers, popularly known as "Corpus," and sometimes as "Corpus Delicti."

"That's your lay-out, is it?" said Delicti, speaking in a kind of planissimo double bass; "I'm to hold up the stage this side of Hogsnot, unload the lady, and take her over the crossroad by the Dogbranch; and you will come out there and recapture her?"

"That's it," said Smithson.

"And the stuff?"

"That's all right. I'll pay you the money when I get the lady—fifty dollars."

"Fifty? Wait a minute. The ante will have to be a hundred."

"A hundred? Why, we've been talking fifty. The job won't take over half a day, and fifty for a half day is good business."

"Ordinarily, maybe; but there's things to be considered. There's my character. I've got a reputation, and it won't sound well that Corpus Delicti surrendered to a tenderfoot. Then there's expenses. I'll have to hire a burro for the lady, and my helper will have to see him. I'll take the Kiote with me, he hasn't sand to shoot a hen, but he can hold a gun on the driver while I work the passengers." Here he beckoned to a red-haired, weazened little fellow, with bandy legs, one shorter than the other, who came see-sawing across the room, and was introduced as the "Lame Kiote," or "Limpy," and who embraced with enthusiasm the manager's proposition to take a drink.

"That's the terms," said Corpus after the refreshments had been absorbed. "We couldn't do this job for less, could we, Limpy?"

"No," promptly answered the Kiote, who knew nothing about either the job or the proposed terms.

"All right," said Smithson, who found himself outvoted. "A hundred it is, then. And now understand. It is the first stage that goes over the road to-morrow—the Sagetown stage. The one from Violet comes over, and passes through Sagetown, and goes on to Hogsnot about two hours later; but our stage is the first one in the morning."

"That's all clear," said Delicti; "the particulars are comprehended."

"There may be a little delay," added Smithson, "in my getting to the rescue. The people at Hogsnot may turn out to assist me; but if they do, I'll lead the crowd off, and dodge away from them."

"Don't let that thought disturb your mind," answered Corpus. "I know the crowd over there; and when they hear that Corpus Delicti is at the other end of the trail, you won't be incommoded by no volunteers."

Bidding his confederates good-bye until the morning, the manager sought the hotel, to hold counsel with Madame Allanni.

"I say, Sally, I've got a big scheme," said he, bustling into the parlor where she was sitting alone; "something to wake the dead and set them scrambling to the box office."

"What do you mean?" asked the lady, in a tone somewhat of contempt.

"Listen!" replied Smithson eagerly. "You take the stage in the morning. Somewhere between here and Hogsnot, Delicti, the man you saw me talking with just now, will hold up the whole business, and take you out. He will be accompanied by a citizen of this place, a very fine man, and they will escort you to a place we have agreed on. Delicti is a perfect gentleman, and you will be treated with the greatest politeness. I will go to Hogsnot to-night, so as to meet the stage when it reaches there with the news of your abduction. Then I'll rip and tear around like mad, borrow a revolver, and dash out to the rescue. In an hour or two, I shall bring you back to Hogsnot in triumph, and we'll go right on to Golden Desre, where the story will have preceded us. The whole population will turn out to get a sight of you; the opera house will be jammed. And that is only the beginning. The story of the abduction of the great prima donna by the famous desperado, Corpus Delicti, and of her rescue single-handed, after a desperate battle with knives and revolver, by her manager, Herr Smithson, will be telegraphed all over the world; and we'll get a good deal of business."

Madame Allanni saw the point. The few details to be settled between them were soon disposed of, and with a parting "Au revoir," the manager went away to take his place for the coming drama and to wait for his cue at Hogsnot.

Everybody knows that the best-laid schemes often go wrong. On the morning, at the hour scheduled for the departure of the first stage, there was an unexpected delay. The passengers, including Madame Allanni, were all aboard and their fares paid; but "Six-Fingered" Joe, the driver, was missing. After an hour's waiting, it was learned that he had gone into a saloon, presumably to take a drink. There was no argument with the bartender, and had a 44-slug blown into his stomach instead. To find a substitute and get him ready to start took time, and in the meantime, the stage from Violet came along, and halting only long enough to give drink to the thirsty horses and driver, went on ahead. And so it happened that, instead of being the first stage, the stage from Violet was the first to arrive at Hogsnot.

There were four passengers in the Violet stage—three men and a woman. The men were a Presbyterian minister, a Pinkerton detective, a drummer from a Chicago show house. Any one would have written down the woman as "splinter" at first sight, and we here introduce her as Miss Lorena June, of Currency, Kan., and we hope the reader will take a good look at her, for she is well worth it.

Miss June's age was, of course, uncertain, but she must have been quite a slip of a girl when Lorena surrendered. She was tall and rather lean, not very angular, but large-boned and strong looking. Her hair was black, coarse, and brushed well back; her face long and narrow; her mouth wide, with thin lips that shut close together. She used spectacles with very large glasses, and wore a plain, dark-colored dress, and a brown straw hat with pink ribbons. She was sitting and had sat all day erect, motionless and silent, holding in her lap a large bandbox, across the top of which was an umbrella, all kept in place by her brown, ungloved hands.

Conversation had been slack in the stage. The lady had kept her eyes fixed on the faces of her fellow-travelers with an expression that implied disapproval, and they all thought they read in those steadfast eyes a suspicion that they were confidence men and had designs on the bandbox. Once the drummer started to tell a story, but Miss June leveled her spectacles at his face with a persistent certainty of aim that was disconcerting; and the story dwindled and became punctuated and meagre of detail, and finally finished without coming to anything.

The horses were going at a brisk trot, when suddenly the vehicle stopped with an abruptness that made the passengers lurch forward in their seats—all but Miss June, the rigidity of whose position was not easily disturbed. Simultaneously there was a vibration, a shuddering of the air, and then the ventral tones of Corpus Delicti's "bandbox."

This invitation was addressed to the driver; but the men all waited a second call; their three pairs of hands went into the air with a celerity and force of action that jerked their shirt collars up against their own eyes. Miss June looked surprised, but said nothing, and clutched her bandbox with a firmer grip. Then the door was opened, and a man in a dark suit and hat appeared, backed by a face the aspect of which sent the passengers into a frantic struggle to get their hands through the top of



"YOU LOOK GAY, SETTIN' THERE ALL HUMPED UP, AND YOUR PAWS IN THE AIR"

She took off her hat and held it between her teeth, while she gathered her loose hair, twisted it up and tucked it in behind. Then she put on her hat, balanced and adjusted it, and after giving her skirts a vigorous shake, turned again to Delicti. "Well, you've got me; and now what are you goin' to do with me?"

"Bless me if I know," he answered; "but the intentions was that the gent that wants you would meet us over on the other road by the Dogbranch."

"The gent that wants me? A man?"

"Yes, a sort of a man—a tenderfoot."

"Who under the canopy can it be? What's his name?"

"I've disremembered his exact name, but it sounds something like Smith."

"Smith! I know Smiths enough, goodness knows, but I can't think of any of 'em this would be likely to be. What kind of a lookin' man is he?"

"Smartish lookin', but no beauty."

"How is he completed?"

"Lightish, with an incline to pinkish about the nose. I don't want no pink-nosed man round me; but I can't think who it can be. Say, what's your name?"

"I think we'd better be introduced."

"I'm well—I'm of opinion that my name originally was William Deathburrow."

"Dear me! That's a thrillin' soundin' name, ain't it? My name is Miss Lorena June. Now you say I was to be took over to where the name of that place is?"

"Yes, Miss June, that was my orders."

"Humph! A heap I care for your orders, if I don't want to go."

"I'm soundly convinced on that point, Miss June; you needn't argue it a minute."

"Well, Mr. Deathburrow, it's just this way: from your description of the man, I don't think I should like him, nor from his actions; but I've great curiosity to see who it is. If it wasn't for that I'd make you send Red Head after a horse and buggy to take me to Rockerville, where I'm goin' on a visit to Fluorella Pease, and keep you here with me as ball till he got back. But as things are I'll go and the sooner we start the sooner we'll get there. What do you think of that?"

She had caught sight of the Kiote just as he had fastened his mouth to the neck of a quart flask and was about to elevate it into the air.

"How are you drinkin' out of that bottle? Liquor?"

"Yes'm," he answered meekly; "not drinkin', exactly, but just a-goin' to. Would you like some of it?"

"Yes, I'd like all of it. Bring it here. Bring it here!" she repeated with emphasis, as he hesitated.

This adjusted, he advanced with halting steps, and surrendered the bottle.

"I don't approve of drinkin'," said she. "I've seen the evil effects and won't have it. I ought by good rights to empty it out, but it's sometimes useful in sickness and so I won't; but I'll see that it don't tempt you any more, right or wrong. And I've got a word in season for you, young man, and that is, you left too much for your own good. I like laffin' in its place; but if I catch you makin' any more fun of me I'll straiten them legs of yours in such a way that they'll come out even."

She then put the bottle into the bandbox and declared herself ready to start.

"Here's your burro," answered Delicti. "Tote him up, Kiote."

"What, that little brute! Me ride on him! I'm better able to carry him than he is me."

"You'll find his strength all right, Miss June."

She went up to the animal and put her hands on his back.

"How'm I goin' to get on? I can get on to any horse, but this thing ain't high enough to jump on to, and he's a little too high to set down on."

"Let me help you, Miss June," said Delicti, and then he took her in his strong arms, and lifting her up as he would a baby, placed her securely in her seat. It seemed the first masculine embrace she had ever experienced, and there was an unmistakable smile on her plain, brown face as she looked down approvingly at her late antagonist.

"Well," said she, "you ain't quite as bad a lookin' man as you might be, though there's plenty room for improvement. But I guess we're both of us a sight to behold."

with one hand and carrying the bandbox with the other. The Kiote brought up the rear, and seemed to be pondering something.

"Have you lived very long about here, Mr. Deathburrow?" said Miss June, after they had gone some distance in silence.

"Well—no, Miss June—not exactly—not very long, just lately. As a fact, I haven't stopped very long anywhere for some period back."

"That's bad," said she; "a roamin' stone gathers no moss. Are you a married man?"

"No, Miss June; not in the least."

"You ought to be. You'd be more respected if you was settled down and had a capable wife to look after you, cut your hair and make you look decent. But I wouldn't advise anybody to settle on such land as this. I wouldn't give a cent an acre for it. I've got a quarter section in Kansas, as good land as ever lay out doors. No incumbrance—eighty acres improved—timber and water—a good house—plenty of stock and money ahead. There's everything that heart could wish. I've carried it on alone for fifteen years and probably always shall. But it's botherin' sometimes. I have to depend on hired men and they want overseer'n. I can do that, but I have to reverse in the house, too; and sometimes I wish I could be in two places at once, or find some capable man to take on of the place. I used to formerly think sometimes, that I might in the future get married; but, oh, calamities of Jeremiah! how is anybody goin' to find the suitable kind of a man? The men nowadays are mostly all fools and incompetents, like them coots in the stage."

At this recollection Miss June indulged in a grim chuckle.

Delicti gave her a sly look of intelligence, and when their eyes met his face wore a smile that matched hers. Then there was silence for a time. As they went along, Miss June's eyes rested on her escort with an expression that indicated strong interest, not unmixed with speculation as to possibilities; and as he walked at her side he had the air of a man trying to make up his mind on a difficult question. As for the Kiote, his humor had vanished. He was superstitious, and had grown horribly afraid of this masterful woman who so coolly assumed authority over him and seemed to dominate even the terrible Corpus Delicti himself.

The rendezvous was soon reached, but Herr Smithson had not yet appeared. Delicti showed no signs of impatience at this, but the Kiote was disappointed and anxious. Miss June remarked that, while they were waiting, she would take a stitch in her dress, which had been torn in the scuffle; and she was soon busy among the contents of the bandbox. Under cover of this diversion the Kiote held a whispered conversation with Delicti.

"Say, Corpus, I'm for skinnin' 'em out."

"Whyfore? What's the matter with 'em?"

"I'm hoodooed. She's a thirty-two-degree witch; and if we don't vamoose while we can, she'll rid us for a couple of bromeliads for all eternity."

"She ain't a bad one, Limpy. I rather like her, and if the tenderfoot comes and gets away with him, I rather incline to think I shall like him."

"Oh, Corpus, she's jumped your claim sure! But there comes the tenderfoot. Now's our chance. I say, scout."

The sound of wheels grinding in the sand was heard and Herr Smithson appeared, driving a horse and buckboard. He alighted and came briskly forward; but his enthusiasm went down to zero when, instead of meeting

Madame Allanni, he was confronted by the threatening figure of Miss June, whose face had a look in it that boded trouble, but quickly changed to one of grim amusement.

"So you're the man that wants me, are you?" said she. "Confound your impudence, to s'pose I'd take up with a little fat squab of a thing like you! Oh, my! Goodby, Johnny." She shut her eyes with a grimace, snapped her fingers and went back to her bandbox.

By this time the resourceful manager had got his second wind. "A fine day, Mr. — Corpus. Well, here we are, but where's the lady?"

"It appears to me she's visible to the naked eye," answered Delicti, motioning with his head in the direction of Miss June, but looking very steadily at Smithson.

"Why, my dear sir, you are joking."

"Whyfore? She's the only lady I know of in these parts."

"But, my esteemed friend, there's a mistake. That ah-party over there is not the lady."

"What's that you say?" roared Delicti. "What did you call her? Her no lady! Take that back, you sucker, or—"

He reached his hand behind him, drew his revolver half out of his belt and made a stride forward.

"Stop it!" cried Miss June. "Stop it right off! I won't have no fightin' over me!" She came up on a run, and with a dexterous movement hooked the crooked handle of her umbrella into Delicti's belt and jerked him backward. There was a sharp report; Delicti gave a roar and grasped one of his legs with both hands. A chamber of his revolver had been discharged and the bullet passing downward had gone through his foot.

Then there was a quick shifting of characters in the scene. At the report of the pistol Herr Smithson bounded into the air like a rubber ball and sprinted down the road at a pace that would take him out of the State by the next morning; while the Kiote, giving a yell of dismay, took to his heels, and working his unequal legs to their full capacity, made off through the sage brush in the opposite direction. But prompt as were these movements they were not quicker than those of Miss June.

Before the manager had made a dozen jumps she was into her bandbox and had out of it a heavy shawl, the bottle of whisky, some vials, pieces of cloth and a pair of scissors. She spread the shawl on the ground, then flew to the buckboard and was back in a flash with the seat cushion, which she put down on the shawl. Then she went to Delicti and put her shoulder under his arm. He, in the meantime, had been hopping about on one foot and bellowing forth his wrath and anguish in roarings that added fresh vigor to the terror-inspired legs of Herr Smithson and sent the alarmed burro galloping off after the Kiote.

"Come right along with me now—right along. You may holler all you want to; it's good for reliev'n' pain, but swearin' won't better it none."

She helped him to sit down on the shawl, and gave him some of the whisky. "It's good for these occasions," said she; "and it's lucky I took it, or that Red Head would have drunk it all up by this time. Now let me have that butcher-knife." She unhooked his belt, took out the knife, and then made him lie down with his head on the cushion. In a minute she had cut away his boot and exposed the injured foot. She examined it carefully and not unskillfully, with eye and hand, and soon declared her opinion that it wasn't much of a wound after all. "The bullet's gone clean through," said she. "And it must have hurt awful at first, for it went right in among the cords; but there ain't no arteries busted nor bones broke."

She took bits of cloth, saturated them with the contents of her vials and put them on the wound. "I use arnica," said she. "Some prefers carbolic oil; but I like arnica, specially for the first application."

Delicti meanwhile had ceased his complainings, and was lying quiet, attentively observing her movements. He looked at her homely, resolute, and yet womanly face, and watched the swift motions of the hands that were so heavy in strife, but so light and deft in their present ministrations.

"Now, Mr. Deathburrow, put your finger on the bandage—right there—and hold it tight while I git a long piece to bind round the whole and sew it on."

The long piece was soon found; and as she secured it in place, she proceeded to administer some wholesome counsel to her patient. "This accident all comes from your carryin' round a loaded pistol. It's a very careless habit, for it may go off any time and hit somebody. And I sometimes think, William—there, I've said it! Well, I might as well say it as think it, and I think sort names is best between friends anyway. You may call me Lorena for all I care. But I was goin' to say, William, I sometimes think you're quick-tempered, and that makes it all the more danger. Think how awful it would be if you had shot the man."

"I wasn't a-playin' it to hurt the fool," said Delicti. "I wanted to scare him away. I was afraid he'd coax you off with him, and I wouldn't had you slope with him for twice the stakes he was to cough up."

"Oh, William, what a joker you are! Me go off with him! I should thought you'd know me better. But you scared him bad enough to pay him well for his impudence to me. He's run the fat all off from him by this time; and at the rate he was goin' his friends'll never see him agin. There, I think that'll be comfortable; but when we git to the village we'll have a doctor look at it for safety, though I don't think he can improve it much."

She got him into the buckboard, wrapped her shawl about his foot and then climbed up herself and took the reins.

"It's lucky that man left his rig behind him," said she. "It looks like a pretty good horse for this country, but I guess he's got a touch of the springhat."

What passed between them on their drive back to Sagetown is a part of their family history and concerns no one outside the family; but as they drove into town, soon after dark, she was saying, "Yes, William, on all accounts it's best for us to go straight home. I can put off the visit to Fluorella Pease—and I don't know as it's very necessary to be made, anyway—and duty calls me back."

They paused once to make an inquiry of a passerby, and then drove to a house known to be the residence of the Baptist minister. Here they stopped and she assisted him into the house, and half an hour later Mr. and Mrs. William Deathburrow came out and went to the doctor's office.

That night when the express went through among those who boarded the train was a lame man who supported himself on one side with an umbrella and was supported on the other by a woman who carried in her free hand a large bandbox. She helped him into the car, made a drummer give up one of two seats he was monopolizing, put him into it and tucked him up. And the bell rang, the conductor shouted, "All aboard," the wheels went round and the train rushed eastward.

